PANORAMA OF THE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH DETECTIVE NOVEL
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW
- The origins (1840-1930) .................................................. 3
- The classical Age (1930-1970) ........................................... 4
- Modernity (from 1970 to the present day) ......................... 4

## THE CONTEMPORARY *NOIR NOVEL* 6
- The *noir*, very *noir* novel ........................................... 6
- The social novel ............................................................ 7
- The political detective novel ......................................... 8
- The historical detective novel ....................................... 10
- The writers-travelers ..................................................... 11
- French style anguish .................................................... 12
- The unclassifiables ....................................................... 13
- Black Humor ................................................................ 14
- French Theory .............................................................. 16

## TOMMORROW’S AUTHORS 18

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE GENRE AND REASONS FOR ITS SUCCESS 20
A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

THE ORIGINS (1840-1930)

If some people trace back the origins of the *noir*¹ novel to Sophocles’ *Œdipus Rex* and the Greek tragedy, the French *noir* novel finds itself rooted in modern era (17th-18th century) popular crime fiction, the “bibliothèque bleue”². Those simple works, sold by peddlers, were intended for a low-literacy readership. In the 19th century, golden age of the French novel, Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo, and later Eugène Sue, breathed into crime fiction a precise social, political and historical depiction, together with high-quality writing. Such literature was a source of influence for the founders of the *noir* novel (for instance, the lovers criminals trinity from Émile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* can be found in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or *Three of a Kind* by James Cain). Simultaneously, a literature haunted by mystery was born in England, the archetype of which is *The Mysteries of London* published in 1842. The American Edgar Allan Poe, as for him, incorporated investigation into the narrative, thus inspiring Émile Gaboriau, the true father of the French detective novel. The latter had in turn a strong influence on Conan Doyle as well as on Gaston Leroux and Maurice Leblanc. The last great innovation is due to Dashiell Hammett with the conversion of the whodunnit novel - in which the crime disrupted the established order – into the *noir* novel – in which the established disorder reigns.

1 *Noir* means black, dark, gloomy. *Noir* novel has become the title name for the genre.
2 Popular edition of all types of writings published under a blue cover made of the same paper sugar loaves were wrapped with.
The classical Age (1930-1970)

French literature, armed with this realistic legacy, easily assimilated the noir novel born in the United States of the 20s and 30s. Two authors: Georges Simenon - as noted by Pierre Assouline, the Simenon river took its source in Liege (Belgium) but fully blossomed in France - and Léo Mallet embody this true birth of the French noir novel. They blended social description and political preoccupation with the codes inherited from Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Whereas the writing of the former, with apparent simplicity, is characterized by the shaping of a highly suggestive language, that of the latter wedds street language with semantic novelty and irony.

Those two trends of the French crime fiction, realistic and fantastic, both continue in our days.

The 50s and 60s were characterized by the success of a picturesque literature (Albert Simonin, Auguste Le Breton, Ange Bastiani) - nearer to the popular imagery than to any kind of reality - whose main elements are an idealized Parisian mob and the systematic use of the Underworld’s language. Nevertheless, a peculiar author must be mentioned: Jean Amila, author of novels signed Jean Mecker, whose realistic narratives embrace the political and social issues of his times.

Around the same period, a duet of authors, Boileau and Narcejac, invent the French type thriller, a genre in which atmosphere and plot contribute to inspire the reader both suspense and anxiety. Alfred Hitchcock used one of their novels, Sueurs Froides, for the script of his masterpiece Vertigo.

Modernity (From 1970 to the present day)

The years 70-90 saw the emergence and then the triumph of what is known as the “neo-polar”. Under the impetus of Jean-Patrick Manchette, and to a lesser extent Jean Vautrin and ADG, France undergoing full transformation found a mirror framed by the social, political, economic and cultural upheavals it was then experiencing. Reclaiming the “behavior style” or behaviorism put into practice by Dashiell Hammett, Manchette brought the French novel into modernity, dragging behind him an array of authors who brought fame to the polar at the end of the 20th century.

The specific nature of that literature is a source of inspiration and a reference for noir novel authors worldwide. As a matter of fact, its influence extends beyond the so-called genre literature since its legacy is claimed by “celebrated” authors such as Jean Echenoz or Michel Houellebecq. The works of Thierry Jonquet – one of the core neo-polar authors – were at the heart of one of Houellebecq’s own novels (La Carte et le Territoire, Goncourt Literary Award 2010) and was adapted for the screen by the Spanish director Pedro Almodovar (La Piel que habito, from Mygale).

3 Originally a slang word for a detective novel, “polar” has now become the title name for the genre
INSERTS ON A FEW BOOKS:

Even though Manchette’s works having been translated in numerous countries, they remain only partially accessible (two titles translated in the United States) and are still unpublished in certain linguistic areas.

*Le Petit bleu de la côte ouest*: The odyssey of an executive in the 70s, drawn despite himself, into a criminal plot, allows the author to build an original romanesque story and to criticize consumption society.

*Nada*: A terrorist group kidnap the US ambassador. A caustic and premonitory staging of terrorism in the 70s.

*La Position du tireur couché*: The shabby trajectory of a contract killer in his later years, together with the radicalization of the author's stylistic partisanship. Considered as a masterpiece by many authors.

*Fatale*: Behaviorism brought to its extreme limit through the refined narrative of a female killer’s escape.

*La Princesse de sang*: Inspired by reading the American Ross Thomas’ novels, Manchette renews his writing and tackles geopolitics and the world of the Intelligence services with this immersion into the revolutionary world of the 50s, from Havana to Budapest.

By Thierry Jonquet, let’s also mention *Du passé faisons table rase*, a frontal attack against the functioning of the French Communist Party, likened to Manuel Vásquez Montalban’s *Meurtre au comité central*.

Benefiting from this polymorphous tradition, the contemporary French noir and detective novel offers vitality and diversity we will now strive to explore.
The classification of literature under genres and subgenres is often an easy way used by researchers, booksellers and publishers, but it also helps the readers find their way among the abundant publishing production. The same applies to the classification we propose below: arbitrary, reductive, uncertain, it nevertheless remains the safest manner to present and organize the panorama of an extremely heterogeneous literature and of oftentimes singular authors. (The novels whose references would be too obscure for foreign readers have been discarded from this panorama)

**THE CONTEMPORARY NOIR NOVEL**

The authors belonging to this category depict violent universes and gripping atmospheres. The plot serves the strength of the characters, the suggestive power of the atmospheres and the violence of the emotions felt by the reader. The regard they show to form makes such authors great stylists.

- **Marcus Malte**: This former musician stages “on the edge” characters with peculiar life courses. The taciturn author – who was a film projectionist for a long time before becoming a jazz pianist – is

\[\text{See note 1}\]
one of the best *noir* novel stylists. With his abundantly awarded *Garden of love*, Marcus Malte walks the tight-rope, between light and shadow, fall and redemption, violence and melancholy. Between dream and reality, this novel - impossible to summarize - is fascinating for its mingled tenderness and violence, and tends to evoke the works of the American, Thomas H. Cook.

- **Antoine Chainas**: His works are harsher than Marcus Malte’s, his novels are qualified as “non-standard”, they are at the limit of bearable, with a rare darkness. With *Versus*, he projects us into the mind of a cop eaten up by hatred. An adept of *houellebecquian* nihilism, this quiet author describes a toxic society, dehumanizing and chilling. In *Pur*, his latest book, winner of the 2014 detective literature award, he sinks us into a France haunted by security issues. If the darkness of the characters evokes James Ellroy, the atmosphere of his novels recalls Robin Cook’s, and his surgical writing can be likened to Brett Easton Ellis’. Antoine Chainas stands out with his incisive provocative style, at the limit of the breaking point.

- **Antonin Varenne**: Atypical, abundant, surprising if not baffling, are the qualifications that always arise when talking of his novels. With *Fakirs*, he unveils the darkest aspects of human nature and invites us to reflect on suicide, torture and power. A polyvalent writer, whose work proceeds towards the historical and epic polar (see p.10)

**The Social Novel**

A realistic genre by essence, the noir novel strives to portray our contemporary world under non-compromising traits. Since its emergence in the United States, it has never stopped highlighting social issues and their effects on people, together with the moral and political crises that swipe across our societies. Amongst its most recurrent themes are economic and social inequities, poverty and its consequences, working conditions, access to health care... And the violence of all kinds generated by the social order.

- **Dominique Manotti**: The works of this university professor have an economic-political and social connotation. With *Bien connu des services de police*, she writes at man’s level and she describes the urban world, from the street corner to the salons of power. Brief, dry, focused, it’s a true war novel and a staggering portrait of the contemporary city. In her books can be found the same willingness to expose the failures of society as it is in James Ellroy’s works.

- **Marin leDun**: His novels evoke the contemporary crisis and its social consequences. *Les Visages écrasés* depicts suffering at work and suicides in companies, his main character being a labour doctor. With his latest novel, *L’Homme qui a vu l’homme*, he writes a sociopolitical chronicle devoid of manicheism. A fiction inspired by actual events, with a sober style and realistic dialogues, this novel reveals the crimes committed in the name of the Reason of State, the collusion between police and justice, and delivers a nuanced portrayal of the Basque reality at the beginning of the 21st century.

- **Didier Daeninckx**: He sets the social issues and the historical investigation at the heart of his fictions. His novels are realistic and denounce the small and big collusions designed by the Republic. *L’Espoir en contrebande* (Goncourt Literary Award for short stories in 2012) narrates slices of life and means to be a portrait of contemporary social difficulties. His first step into literature, *Meurtre pour mémoire*, was rather confined to the historical novel, unveiling Maurice Papon’s role both in occupied
France and during the bloody repression of a demonstration by Algerians in Paris in October 1961. More recently, *Tête de maures*, plunges us into the reality of contemporary Corsica and unveils an unknown historical fact, the military expedition organized in 1931 by Pierre Laval, then *Président du Conseil* (title for the Government Leader under the French 3rd and 4th Republics) and Minister of the Interior.

**Pierre Lemaitre**: Awarded for the 2013 Goncourt for a novel on World War I which shares all the characteristics of the genre without claiming it, Pierre Lemaitre began his career with three *noir* novels, among which *Cadres noirs* (2010), in which an executive on the dole accepts a part in a role-play in the form of a hostage-taking. A bitter and caustic description of our societies, the novel is outlandish and breathless. *Cadres noirs* could be described as a mix between a novel by Michel Houellebecq and *The Ax* by Donald Westlake.

**Nicolas Mathieu**: He could have been listed amongst the authors one should keep an eye on but his first novel, *Aux animaux la guerre*, offers such a level of stylistic mastery and originality that the novelist already seems to be a safe asset. Nicolas Mathieu plunges us into the heart of the Vosges Mountains, into a rural area experiencing deindustrialization, where a staff representative, a former OAS member and his grand-daughter, a Labour inspector along with adrift workers attempt to survive. The weight of the elements, whether meteorological or social, can be felt on each page. A distant heir to Jim Thompson, Nicolas Mathieu commits to describing a rural universe in dire conditions.

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**Marin Ledun**

How do you explain the success of the contemporary French *polar*?

A society in crisis is a society looking for meaning and wishing to understand the world around. The *polar* precisely performs the function of deciphering the social mechanics in which we are entangled thus explaining, I guess, its success in France whilst the economic situation is particularly harsh.

What are your sources of inspiration? (authors, movies, TV series...)

My inspiration mainly springs from the press, whether it be daily, national or specialized, TV or radio documentaries, and the contemporary *noir* novel (Peace, Ellroy, Dessaint, Varenne, Leroy, Winslow, and so on).

Your novels are usually classified under the label "*polar*". Do you agree with that? If you had to define them otherwise, what terms would you choose?

*Polar*, *noir* novel, social thriller, to be honest the convention is unimportant, as long as it refers to a popular and a social critique literature, a genre that strives to describe and put into words crime as a cornerstone of our societies.

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**The political detective novel**

Traditionally a literature of protest and opposition – Dashiell Hammett was prosecuted by Senator McCarthy’s Un-American Activities Committee – or simply a mirror of the State machinery and the mechanisms of power, the *noir* novel is often considered to be the only genre sufficiently honest and free of complexes to elucidate political plotting. It likes revealing the tensions, the dirty tricks, while slightly exaggerating the reality behind the politics: fight for power, corruption, abuses of power, intelligence services, terrorism and anti-terrorism.
**DOA:** This author is singled out thanks to his cold distant depiction of political and police realities. The partisanship or convictions of the author never crop out in his roman-esque prose. A realistic saga, *Citoyens clandestins* intertwines the itineraries of some terrorists, an intelligence service agent and a spy infiltrated in an Islamist organization. In tune with the news and particularly well-informed and realistic, the novel seems to be a compulsory step for the reader interested in the functioning of anti-terrorism. Also note a very good four-hand novel co-written with Dominique Manotti: *L’Honorabile società*.

**Serge Quadruppani:** He is the French translator of Camilleri, De Cataldo, and the best authors of the Italian noir novel new generation. Serge Quadruppani’s novels come close to their plots, for instance *Saturne*, a novel interweaving terrorism, anti-terrorism, the multiple and complex implications of mafias, FVCs and government. As a counterpoint to this darkness, the author creates hedonistic attaching characters, savouring the pleasures of existence: siesta, bathing, food, humor and sexuality.

**Jérôme Leroy:** His favorite themes are the criticism of society and refusal of a dehumanized world. With *Le Bloc*, he depicts the rise of the extreme right wing over the past thirty years, and offers a true immersion in the party and its ground. His latest novel, and his best yet, *L’Ange gardien*, dives into the parallel services of the “Deep State”. Through characters such as a killer serving state agencies and hunted down by his former employers, a failed writer defamed by a nauseating press and a coloured minister manipulated by her own side, Jérôme Leroy portrays a disquieting world not so far from ours. The writing - in the form of a tribute to Manchette - the structure and the original use of temporality make this novel one of the best of the decade.

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**How do you explain the success of the contemporary French polar?**

I’m not certain the “French polar” is a success. There exists a genre, the polar - this word is very ugly - gathering several types of literature that attract the French readers. Amidst this overabundant supply, some French contemporary authors have met their audience. Good for them. But it’s nothing like a tsunami of all French authors either, as I see it.

**What are your sources of inspiration?** (authors, movies, TV series...)

History - whether recent or more ancient -, questionings about the world’s affairs. I like some novelists - often without a genre - but they don’t inspire me, I’m not trying to emulate them. As for other media, if they exert some influence, it’s merely unconscious and remains of secondary importance. Books are sacred, our last free space.

**Your novels are usually classified under the label “polar”. Do you agree with that? If you had to define them otherwise, what terms would you choose?**

Who classifies them as such? After how much thinking? I’m published in Série Noire, and I’m very proud of it. I’ve got the best French publisher but the texts proposed in its Série Noire have various ambitions and purposes. “Polar” is perforce a restrictive term if it qualifies them all and to be restrictive is wrong. I write novels, noir at most.

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5 A famous French collection of detective and noir novels published by Gallimard
The historical detective novel

The historical detective novel ties a police investigation grounded in a given historical period or an ancient civilization to a plot generally interweaving events and characters, real and fictitious. While the strictly historical novel – whose reference is *The name of the rose* by Umberto Eco – remains vital for authors such as Jean-François Parot (the 18th century) or Jean D’Aillon (the Middle-Ages), novelists also explore contemporary history, and more particularly France under the Occupation or the Algerian war.

- **Jean-François Parot**: A former diplomat whose works draw upon the life and customs of the 18th century. His recurring hero, Nicolas Le Floch, solves various criminal mysteries with the help of his deputy, Inspector Pierre Bourdeau. The novels follow his social ascent and his love affairs and offer a nuanced portrayal of France in the last decades before the Revolution.

- **Hervé le Corre**: This author covers the whole range of the genre, notably with *L’Homme aux lèvres de saphir*, a classical historical detective story that depicts 19th century Paris and in which he pays tribute to Lautréamont, and with *Après la guerre*, a tapestry of France in the 1940s, whose writing pays tribute to “littérature blanche” writers such as René Calet or Raymond Guérin.

- **Romain Slocombe**: Initially known as a writer-traveler with a notable trilogy on Japan, Romain Slocombe, a history enthusiast, has been concentrating on that genre for a few years. If ShangaiConnexion brings into light unknown aspects of World War II, his two latest novels are set in the interwar period. *Dernière station avant l’abattoir*, whose setting is the international meeting in Genoa in 1922, unveils the simultaneous birth of two totalitarianisms, communism and fascism. As for *Avis à mon exécuteur*, it traces the itinerary of two soviet agents, of Jewish Polish origin, who take refuge in the West and end up murdered by the KGB in 1941. This novel definitely recalls *L’Homme qui aimait les chiens* by Leonardo Padura, a novel that interlaces both the path of Trotsky and of his murderer.

- **Antonin Varenne**: After writing two noir novels (see p.7), Antonin Varenne completely reinvented himself with *Trois mille chevaux vapeur*. At the same time a war novel, a historical novel and a western, the novel drags us from the Burmese jungle to the America of the conquest of the Wild West, via the London underworld. This perfectly mastered epic initiation novel takes Antonin Varenne along the steps of Joseph Conrad and R.L. Stevenson.

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**Hervé Le Corre**

How do you explain the success of the contemporary French polar?

I’m not quite sure what success we’re on about. I don’t have enough hindsight to reach a judgment. But it seems to me French authors are more concerned about their writing, their plots. We’re far from the quickly written, quickly forgotten polar prevailing in the 90s.

**What are your sources of inspiration? (authors, movies, TV series...)**

Sundry news. Capitalist society and all the violence it inflicts on those it excludes and/or destroys. History.

**Your novels are usually classified under the label “polar”. Do you agree with that? If you had to define them otherwise, what terms would you choose?**

Unimportant. If I must choose, I prefer noir novel. Or just novel, why not? Quite simply.

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6 “White literature” - as opposed to black (noir) literature - i.e. any publication not classified as crime fiction.
From Nicolas Bouvier to Sylvain Tesson, travel literature is a flourishing genre, much appreciated by the audience. But more than the journey and the movement, it’s the prolonged immersion within a distant society that feeds the works of noir novel travelers. Familiar with the landscapes, society, culture, and history of a territory, they apply their knowledge and observations to the service of a crime fiction both exotic and informative for the reader. Ethnologists, sociologists, historians and geographers, these novelists are in the wake of Jules Vernes’ *Michel Strogoff* and *Les Tribulations d’un Chinois en Chine*, with a consistent personal experience of the settings as a bonus. The mathematical proof.

- **Caryl Férey**: After having traveled through Europe on a motorbike, gone around the world and worked for *Guide du routard*, Caryl Férey anchored his literary universe in the countries where he lived. *Zulu*, abundantly awarded and adapted for the screen, is a police investigation in Capetown with Apartheid as its background. The novel bears witness to the flaws of South-African society and to the inhumanity of South/North relations. In his latest novel, *Mapuche*, he uses this same device to offer the reader a portrait of contemporary Argentina.

- **Olivier Truc**: Local correspondent in Stockholm for the newspaper *Le Monde*, he accurately depicts Lapland - a territory across several states - in *Le Dernier Lapon*. Building up on an efficient detective plot, the author unveils the traditional structures of that society, the contemporary upheavals it has to face, the political fights between Sami autonomists and extreme-right wing parties, as well as the covetousness awakened by Lapland’s natural resources.

- **Ian Manook**: A celebrated and multi-awarded novel, *Yeruldegger* unfolds in the heart of Mongolia. It is the first opus of a series around the eponymous character, which leads us from the forlorn steppe of Mongolia to the disquieting underworld of Ulan-Bator. Ian Manook lets the reader discover a mythical country, yet ignored until now both by literature and the media.

- **Ingrid Astier**: “A pedestrian in Paris” - just like Léon-Paul Fargue - she too tracks down exoticism but she finds it in Paris and its inner suburbs. Her two intricately plotted novels, *Quais des enfers* and *Angle Mort*, cast a new eye on the mythical city and invite the reader, whether familiar with the capital or not, to do the same. Ingrid Astier - in line with Donna Leone’s approach to Venice - unveils and reveals Paris.

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**What are your sources of inspiration? (authors, movies, TV series...)**

Jacques Brel, René Char, *Pierrot le Fou* by Godard and American movies of the 70s, James Ellroy, Fante, rock’n’roll.

**Your novels are usually classified under the label “polar”. Do you agree with that? If you had to define them otherwise, what terms would you choose?**

We like fitting things into boxes in France. I don’t care, I write novels.

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7 A well-known French travel guide collection
French style anguish

This genre uses suspense and narrative tension to provoke the readers’ excitement or apprehension and keep them breathless until the plot’s resolution. Heirs of Boileau-Narcejac, French authors grab American thrillers’ innovations and take them on board. Highly influenced by cinema, where suspense is one of the mainsprings, their writing is marked by an utterly cinematographic dryness and behaviorism. If literature is an endless source of inspiration for the movies, the latter repays it well.

- **Franck Thilliez**: This former engineer knows how to take advantage of his scientific knowledge to build remarkably well-documented plots. A prolific author, he interlocks his knowledge with suspense, making these “islands of truth” integral parts of his narrative. Franck Thilliez has started enjoying a great success beyond our borders, particularly in the United States, and never ceases playing on the French thriller’s conventions underscored by the American storytelling tradition. With *Gataca*, he questions man’s evolution since Cro-Magnon, genetic manipulations, eugenics... And he manages to rival the big names of American thrillers.

- **Jean-Christophe Grangé**: A highly celebrated author in France and in the United States, this former journalist draws his inspiration from his past highly-documented reportages. His very dark bloody thrillers are characterized by the complexity of the plots. *Les Rivières pourpres* has become a classic thanks to the adaptation for the screen by Mathieu Kassovitz. With *Kaïken*, he invites us to discover traditional Japanese culture, and pursues a serial killer who disembowels women in the final stages of their pregnancy. His works, in terms of form or content, can be likened to those of the American Harlan Coben.

- **Maxime Chattam**: Familiar with American culture thanks to his frequent stays in the United States, he followed a criminology course before getting into writing. Claiming to be part of an American collective imagination (novels, TV series, movies) this author could be thought to come straight from the United States: he perfectly masters the ropes of the thriller with short chapters, permanent tension, twists, horror scenes... *La Promesse des ténèbres* rushes us into a plot set in the heart of New York City where death is shot in progress. His breathless novels can be compared to Thomas Harris’s

- **Karine Giébel**: Author of numerous awarded novels, she is the queen of the psychological thriller. Leading her reader to the gates of the unbearable, she distills uneasiness, a permanent tension, and plays with the reader’s nerves. *Purgatoire des innocents* narrates a robbery that goes wrong and the increasing horror which the characters are confronted with. The amateurs of Lee Child’s works won’t be able to resist falling under this author’s spell.
The unclassifiables

Because they explore an original fictional route, because they don’t fit in with any genre and because their works can be matched to none other, they are the unclassifiable authors of the French noir novel.

• Tobie Nathan: A diplomat, a professor in psychology and an ethno psychiatrist, Tobie Nathan is the sole representative of the ethno psychiatric polar. He is an heir to Georges Devereux, founder of ethno psychiatry, to whom Arnaud Desplechin dedicated the movie Jimmy P starring Benicio del Toro. Through his novels, he seeks to demonstrate that both cultural and political environments are essential to understand and treat a psychological disorder. An African, a Malaysian, an Indian and a European will suffer different illnesses. It is essential to take into account their ethnicity, their gods and their way of understanding the world to cure such pathologies.

• Barouk Salamé: By means of three novels, very different from one another, Barouk Salamé imposed himself as one of the most peculiar authors of his generation. If Le Testament syriaque - an investigation around Prophet Muhammad’s secret testament - can be likened to Umberto Eco’s novels, the second one, Arabian Killer for its part leans towards a classical espionage novel, with the contemporary Middle East at the heart of the plot. As for Une guerre de génies, de héros et de lâches, it offers a new perspective on the issues at stake in the Algerian war. Characters escaping all form of Manicheism, a vast knowledge serving the plot and a great feeling for narratives, Barouk Salamé opens new ways for tomorrow’s novels.

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How do you explain the success of the contemporary French polar?

There we can come across the concrete life of our fellow citizens, our fellow beings, as opposed to the “belles lettres” (great literature) that fit in more and more with the “beaux quartiers” (wealthy neighborhoods). The polar has taken over the realistic post-war novel, by Mauriac, by Sartre or by Camus, all the more that French polars have noticeably improved in style. The polar, today’s narrative...

What are your sources of inspiration? (authors, movies, TV series...)

My sources of inspiration are numerous: psychology to a large extent, politics just as much. Above all, I’m eager to portray the real people from the underprivileged districts and suburbs, together with their historical and geographical in-depth context. I don’t know whether they inspired me, but these three American writers remain models for me: James Hadley Chase, James Ellroy and Tony Hillerman.

Your novels are usually classified under the label “polar”. Do you agree with that? If you had to define them otherwise, what terms would you choose?

I have written a few polars - and I still write some! - but I also write “littérature blanche”. But when it’s the case, I’m proud my novels are labeled under the “polar” category, because I’m sure it’s a modern genre - and anyway the best device to get into the characters’ psychology.

Black Humor

Crime fiction is not always a synonymous for darkness, morbidity or gravity: it can be wacky and weird when authors conceive batty plots, imagine loony characters, nutcases, and jazz it all up with humor. But laughter doesn’t prevent cruel truths from being exposed... They depict French society in a ferocious way, as did Christopher Moore on the other side of the Atlantic.

* Fred Vargas : Her success being acknowledged in France and worldwide, she no longer needs to be introduced. Fred Vargas was awarded the International Dagger prize by the prestigious Crime Writers Association, just like Pierre Lemaitre. For the British readers, as well as for the French audience, she truly is a star. Fred Vargas could have gone under the label “history” for her knowledge as a historian so deeply impregnates her brilliant plots. With millions of copies sold, she is a publishing phenomenon - her works are translated in over 40 countries - thanks to her recurring character Police Commissioner Adamsberg who appears for the first time in *L’Homme aux cercles bleus* and whom we meet again in more than ten *polars*. She can serve as a reference.

* Jean-Bernard Pouy : A must of the French *noir* novel, inventive and prolific, he received in 2008 the “Grand Prix de l’Humour Noir” for his corpus of work. A staunch defender of the popular novel (Prix Paul Féval 1996), he is at the origin of the creation of the series *Le Poulpe* in 1995. A supporter of the *noir* novel, but also of outlandish characters and situations, he draws both a critical and epic portrait of society through its predominant phenomena: class and ideological struggles, football, writers and publishers... Just like his other novels, *Spinoza encule Hegel* - a title already riven with humor - is very quick, crude and biting. Julius Puech, a.k.a. Spinoza, armed and riding his Guzzi 850 California, wearing...
his lizard-skin mauve boots, and moved by his love of ethics, fights his arch enemy: Hegel and aesthetics. Hilarious! His use of writing constraints, in the wake of Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec’s OULIPO, and his love for style, make his work, contrary to its apparent lightness, some of the most enthralling of the moment.

• Sébastien Gendron: This former assistant director, whose universe is very similar to Quentin Tarantino’s, managed to find in the noir novel the keys to depict a disintegrating society. The plot of his latest novel, Road Trip, is very simple: how to utterly ruin one’s life when you have everything to succeed. With that idea in mind, he follows two men who meet on the occasion of a small job handing out leaflets. If one of them is a dropout, without any culture and clearly slightly mad, the other appears - at first - to be completely balanced and simply going through a difficult time. In a spaghetti western atmosphere of secondary roads and commercial zones, this novel unfolds with gripping suspense!

• Joseph Incardona: A great reader of American noir literature, he signs with Lonely Betty a pastiche of the noir novel and plays with all the clichés of the genre. Thanks to a clever pirouette, his parody becomes a tribute. He doesn’t merely try to entertain; he also tells us all about his admiration for the great masters of the genre, who have an undeniable influence over his work. With this short narrative, Joseph Incardona approaches serious themes with a rhythmical, instinctual and fast writing whose entertaining dimension is a sign of modesty. On the other side of the Atlantic, his works could be likened to Donald Westlake’s in their comedic dimension.

• Colin Thibert: The art of staging is one of the strong characteristics of this author who can make us laugh out loud. His gloomy narratives, premonitory and on the whole pessimistic, oppose naive, unimportant or manipulated people with the cynicism of all types of power, just like John Steinbeck in Of Mice and men. A perfect plot builder, he bastes this narrative coldness in distance, humor, if not daftness. In Cahin-Chaos, with a hilarious and ferocious darkness, he continues with his narratives about pathetic enterprises which invariably end up in failures. It seems rather obvious to liken his works to Charlie Williams’ novels.

What are your sources of inspiration? (authors, movies, TV series...)
I’m a great fan of American movies of the 70s, the era of the New Hollywood, when guys like Dennis Hopper escaped to Mexico in their cars with their rushes in the boot to edit their films far away from the producers.

Your novels are usually classified under the label “polar”. Do you agree with that? If you had to define them otherwise, what terms would you choose?
I enjoy belonging to the bad genre only because it’s so called. I write sort of dramatic comedies but that is a label whose copyright only belongs to Télérama. So, I don’t know. Maybe “noir comedies” would be a more appropriate box.
FRENCH THEORY

If French literature sometimes travels with difficulties, French research and essays exert a very strong influence on literary and university criticism worldwide. Here is a review of some history and literary studies that put noir and detective novels at the centre of their thinking.

HISTORY

• François Guérif: With *Du polar, a book of interviews with Philippe Blanchet*, François Guérif, a pioneer and a disseminator, a discoverer and a pope of contemporary *polar*, offers complete panoply of worldwide crime fiction. He details the groups, reveals the important development paths of the genre and their links with History; he lingers on the various styles and writing forms, and offers touching portraits of the authors he has mixed with, from Robin Cook to Edward Bunker, from James Ellroy to Donald Westlake. He also is the author of a biography of James Cain.

• Philippe Garnier: An expat in Los Angeles for many years, a journalist, a translator (James Crumley, Harry Crews, John Fante), Philippe Garnier penned a formidable biography of David Goodis, and an enthralling investigation of Hollywood writers, *Honni soit qui Malibu*, in which we come across James Cain, W.R. Burnett and William Faulkner inter alia.

• Manchette Chroniques: A compendium of all Manchette’s writings on *noir* novels. If the volume is of uneven quality, the second part is fascinating. He subtly analyses the history of the genre, questions all the issues of style and writing, and being extremely curious, he mentions the importance of great authors from their first novels. For instance, his review of Ellroy’s first novel translated into French insured the author of immediate success, including beyond our borders, and led him, as from the 1990s, to publish his novels in France before their issue in the United States. Besides, his *Journal* (to be likened to Chandler’s correspondence) bears witness to his literary and cinematographic influences, to his understanding of literature and writing. We thus witness in real time the genesis and maturing of an author’s novels.

• Jean-Bernard Pouy: *Une brève histoire du roman noir*: In about a hundred pages, Jean-Bernard Pouy scans the world history of the noir novel. With that pseudo-dilettante tone of his, he very subtly classifies and characterizes a hundred authors from very different backgrounds and styles. An essential tool for all amateurs of the genre or for all readers wishing to discover that literature.

ANALYSES

• Luc Boltanski: *Énigmes et complots*: a sociologist, Luc Boltanski looks for the causes of the emergence and success of crime fiction, essentially English and French, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. He links the birth of the genre to that of democratic nation-states and to the development of capitalism, and likens it to that of sociology, in the same era, and to the identification of paranoia by medicine.

The suspicion that reality may be different from what it appears to be entails an anxiety that overflows into the detective novel, into the discovery of a new mental illness and into a scientific discipline, sociology. The investigation led by the character, whether a private eye or a police officer, just like that of the sociologist or the psychoanalyst, aims at seeking true reality hidden behind appearances. Solving the enigma permits the restoration of the endangered established order until the emergence of the strictly “*noir novel*” in which, on the contrary, the original disorder persists.
Between literary history, sociological analysis and socio-political history, a dense, brilliant and stimulating interdisciplinary essay.

• **Jean-Yves Tadié**: *Le Polar américain, la modernité et le mal*: The author introduces a genre open onto the social and political history of the United States, confronted to the same moral, linguistic and stylistic concerns as the “great literature” of its time, and marked by the intellectual currents and pessimistic ideologies born from the industrial revolution and World War I. A fundamental study on the history of the genre and a finely argued plea for its literary quality.

• **Pierre Bayard**: A professor of literature, Pierre Bayard uses literary investigation and psycho-analysis to analyze each work, thus engaging into a theoretical reflection on what literature, reading, and more generally speaking, man, are. Thus, with *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?* (Minuit, 1998) and *L’Affaire du chien des Baskerville* (Minuit, 2008), an iconoclastic analysis of the works of Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle, he submits two essays at the same time scholarly, stimulating and funny.

• **Michel Pastoureau**: *Noir, Histoire d’une couleur*: “Noir novel”, “Noir movie”, noir has been used to characterize and define the genre as from its emergence (with one exception, Italy that associates crime fiction to yellow). A historian and a specialist of colours, Michel Pastoureau retraces the history of the colour “black” and the way it’s been perceived over the centuries.

How do you explain the success of the contemporary French polar?

It’s not necessarily the only genre that dissects reality, but it’s the only one that does it as a rule. Therefore, the “Polar” mirrors the spirit of our age (language, ideology, dramaturgy) without lying too much and without seeking refuge inside the impotent ego of the powerless writer.

What are your sources of inspiration? (authors, movies, TV series...)

The main source is our times. How people deal with ideology. How they see the World and try to handle its dysfunction. A matter of ethics, rather than of mere morality...

Your novels are usually classified under the label “polar”. Do you agree with that? If you had to define them otherwise, what terms would you choose?

Without any hesitation: the label NOIR NOVEL which radically differentiates it from the “Detective Novel” - which I dislike - centering around characters who, from a societal perspective, appear to be the enemies....
TOMORROW’S AUTHORS

Being young authors, they have only published one or two novels up to now, but have been noticed by the critics and the readers. If little is known of these authors yet, their first works speak for them.

• Jérémie Guez :
Influenced by American literature, this young author has managed to reclaim and transpose the great figures of the polar, such as the private eye in *Du Vide plein les yeux*. He also is a scriptwriter and cinema is already pursuing him. He is the first guest of éditions 10/18 that launch in their collection “Grands détectives”, a new series of historical novels: he has chosen to talk about Indochina in *Le Dernier tigre rouge*.

• Emmanuel Grand :
With his first novel, *Terminuz Belz*, he explores a criminal field as of yet rarely exposed in literature (but dealt with by the movies especially in *Eastern Promises*), the activities of Eastern mafias in the West. Illegal immigrants trafficking, prostitution industry, these new forms of organized crime are the consequences of the globalization of exchanges and of the economic unbalance of the planet. As a counterpoint to this aspect of modernity, the author stages an island in Britany which seems to have been motionless for centuries but experiences the consequences of the new economic world order too.
• Frédéric Jaccaud:
Influenced by Antonin Artaud, he signs with La Nuit, a dense narrative where a multitude of characters and topics mingle: the manipulation of information, the end of the world, the idiocy of unplanned ecology, the drama of loneliness, the drift towards the security state. A universe where fates criss-cross and mingle towards a twilight end of the world. Saturated with information, the reader is snatched by a gripping novel full of important issues, as in a book by James Ellroy.

• Sandrine Collette:
With her first noir novel awarded, Sandrine Collette stages a very gloomy, murky if not morbid, universe. Des Nœuds d’acier tackles the theme of sequestration, with a violent character, consumed by hatred, and confronted by characters yet more cunning and wild than him. Empathy and enclosure are two characteristics of her narratives.

• Alexis Ragougneau:
La Madone de Notre-Dame is a brief narrative, both a homage to Victor Hugo and therefore to the edifice that had inspired him, Notre-Dame de Paris. This first novel stages clergymen and girls adrift, in a solemn and disquieting atmosphere.

• Sylvain Kermici:
Hors la nuit, is a narrative in the second person plural in which a man, after his parents’ death, gradually sinks into madness. This brief hypnotizing and eerie narrative ends with a terrifying conclusion.

• Alexis Deniger:
Corsica is one of the occidental territories with the highest per capita crime rate but still the island was ignored by crime fiction for a long time. Alexis Deniger has filled that gap with I Cursini, a novel in which we discover the mission theatre where nationalists (sometimes amongst themselves), police forces, secret agents and mafia gangs fight before the very eyes of official or hidden powers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE GENRE AND REASONS FOR ITS SUCCESS

As demonstrated by Annie Collovald and Erik Neveu in their investigation *Lire le noir*, this editorial field is experiencing a constant expansion in France thanks notably to the increasing number of publishers and collections (in France, five new genre collections were created in 2014) and to the diversification of authors and themes. Detective literature is not a popular literature in the sense it would first and foremost reach the popular classes. On the contrary, its readers can be found in all social classes, and are particularly numerous among clerks, junior and senior executives and intellectual occupations.

**Le polar en chiffres**

**THE PRODUCTION :**
Novelties and new editions
Without matching its 2010 record, the production of detective and espionage novels increased by 6%, in 2013, reaching 1,820 novelties and new editions.

**THE FORMATS :**
Sales distribution in copies in 2013
Out of the 16 million detective novels sold in France last year, according to IPSOS, for a turnover of 168.8 million Euros, 77% were sold in the paperback format, a level equivalent to that of 2012.

**THE MAIN PUBLISHERS :**
In number of copies sold in 2012
Last year, Pocket sold more than one detective novel out of five, and saw its share of sales increase by 2.5 percentage points. All in all, the sales of polars were shared between 15 428 book references versus 14 909 the previous year (+ 3.5%).
The attraction exerted by genre literature can be explained by the dual desire of readers to be entertained and escape their daily reality, while satisfying a need for curiosity or reflection on the state of the world. *Noir* literature, by its alluring narrative construction and its constant concern for the unveiling of reality, meets this dual requirement. On the other hand, the individualism that characterizes our societies generates literary forms such as auto fiction and, on a wider scale, sectarian literatures centered on a very limited background. On the contrary, the noir novel aims at understanding and at apprehending the world’s reality in its complexity and its holistic approach.

Legitimizing that literature, despite the persistence of a few snobberies, has been an established fact for quite a few years, as is proven by its entrance into the university circles, the substantial space now assigned to it in the literary press, and the awards and successful reviews granted to authors like Jean Echenoz or Pierre Lemaitre (Goncourt Literary Award).

As noted by Macha Séry (Le Monde, August 20, 2014) “the influence of the detective novel and its taste for investigation” could partly explain the infatuation of French contemporary novelists for facts and for staging their research around such facts, just like private eyes. To quote only a few among the most famous: Patrick Modiano (*Dora Bröder*), Adrien Bosc (*Constellation*), Laurent Binet (*HHhH*), Emmanuel Carrère (*L’Adversaire*), Jacques Chessex (*Le Vampire de Ropraz*).

Likewise, the use of the investigative forms of crime fiction in the narratives of some historians such as Ginzburg or Michèle Perrot (*Mélancolie ouvrière*) can be observed.

And beyond literature, we can agree with Luc Boltanski that “detective narratives and espionage narratives - which haven’t ceased to multiply since the beginning of the 20th, first in written form then via movies and television - are nowadays the most widespread narrative forms, and what’s more on a global level. They thus play an unmatched role in the representation of reality now available to any human being, even though illiterate, provided they can access the modern media”.

Thanks to its vitality, the constant renewal of its forms, the scale and universality of its concerns, the care paid to its use of language, its questioning of contemporary realities, the quality of its mastery of the narrative structure, the French detective novel has more than ever got a great future ahead outside the borders of the hexagon. Let’s not doubt that AFP’s forecast (Livres Hebdo, 28/03/2014) according to which “the French polar is going to supersede the northern *polar* in the hearts of worldwide amateurs of the genre” will come true.

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**A PROJECT UNDERTAKEN BY QUAI DU POLAR**

Quais du Polar has become THE key event of the genre. Firmly established in the French and European cultural scenery, it is both recognised by the professionals and an ever increasing audience attending the different events organised by the festival.

A choice of novels, graphic novels, films, suspense quests in the streets of Lyon, exhibitions, games... throughout the four-day 2015 festival.

The festival is for all audiences: from bulimic crime fiction readers, amateur detectives, crime column fans and thrill-seeking moviegoers to curious passers-by, citizens well-informed in world affairs, party goers who love meeting people, and graphics and comic book enthusiasts... Whatever your age, whatever your gang, day and night, Quais du Polar is the place to be!